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Background of the History of Moslem Libraries

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## BACKGROUND OF THE HISTORY OF MOSLEM LIBRARIES

BY RUTH STELLHORN MACKENSEN  
Chicago, Illinois

The Moslem era dates from the flight (*Hijra*) of Mohammed and a handful of followers from Mecca to Medīna in 622 A.D., but it was not long before the eccentric of Mecca had become the prophet of Arabia. However, the religion he founded was not destined to remain an insignificant sect or cult, peculiar to that isolated peninsula, for within a few years it had spread to lands the names of which were probably unknown to Mohammed. Nor was Islām to remain simply a religion; submission to Allāh became the heart of a great civilization which united lands as widely separated as Spain and India, and peoples hitherto divided by race, language, culture, and religion. Mohammed, the Koran, and the Arabic language soon became their common bond, and the grounds for a loyalty more vital than the differences which separated them. This is not to say that Islām swept away all the old distinctions of nationality, language, and custom, but it did supply the elements necessary for the development of a great empire and civilization.

As the Arab armies poured over the East they obliterated much which hindered their progress; they destroyed many of the material and cultural as well as religious products of older civilizations which they either did not respect or considered positively obnoxious. They conquered, they killed, they looted, they burned, but they left untouched far more than they destroyed. The amazing thing is not that these virile but unlettered sons of the desert merely respected the cultures of their new subjects, but that they quickly took possession of much which was utterly alien to their former life. It was not enough for these simple nomads to exchange their black tents for palaces and city houses, to enjoy the conveniences and luxuries of a settled life. Before long, eager minds among them recognized that those whom they had conquered had much to teach, and they showed themselves apt pupils. "Unbelievers" as well as non-Arab converts to Islām became their

teachers, and they learned the strange lessons so rapidly and so well that within a few generations their new capital, Bagdad, was a center of learning and the arts. Islām was transformed from the simple faith in Allāh and his prophet into a great culture in which the heritage of the desert was united with that of Greece, Christendom, Persia, and India. As has happened so often, the conquerors were the conquered.

The Golden Age of the Abbasid caliphs of Bagdad is characterized by a love of literature, music and the other arts, philosophy and science, as well as by religious, political, and material developments. The followers of Mohammed no longer felt that his book alone sufficed. The time had passed when the library of a Moslem contained but one book, the Koran. Mohammed was deeply impressed with the writings, especially the Scriptures, of the Jews and Christians about him; he believed that every people had its sacred book, and he became convinced that his people too must have one of their own, if they were to have a religion with authority and prestige. And so he gave them one. The written word fascinated him, and through the ages it has continued to fascinate his spiritual posterity. The Arabs brought a book with them from the desert, and wherever they went they found more books. Many felt that these foreign books were of no value as compared to their one, but others, though continuing to hold the Koran unique, hastened to read whatever they found. And so, with the eagerness of a child in a toy shop, they collected books and translated them into the language of the prophet. They saw and heard of libraries and felt they too must have libraries.

One cannot but admire the willingness and ability of the Arabs to learn from their neighbors and to adapt this new knowledge to their own needs. They originated little but they copied and assimilated much. Just as they took the great Byzantine churches as architectural models for their mosques, so also they built their learning on the models of those who were adepts. In the course of this article it will become apparent that the idea of libraries, not merely as storehouses for books but as centers of culture and study, was taken over along with foreign literature and developed into something quite characteristic and individual. It is more than likely that the processes of book manufacture and library technique were also borrowed. They saw the collections of books in Christian monasteries and churches, in the homes

of scholars and the palaces of enlightened rulers of Byzantium and Persia, and they heard or read of great Greek libraries and academies, especially in Alexandria. But they developed the library as an institution to unprecedented lengths. Not until quite recent times have libraries been so numerous, well stocked, and widely patronized as they were in Moslem lands.

Not only did cultured or scholarly individuals assemble private collections, but special libraries were founded for the cultivation of various departments of literature and the sciences. Hence we find collections of medical books in hospitals; works on mathematics, astronomy, and astrology in observatories; religious and legal writings in mosques and colleges; and rich and more diversified collections in several great academies. Moslems early discovered the possibilities of libraries as institutions of propaganda, and not a few were founded for the express purpose of disseminating the peculiar doctrines of special sects. Public libraries were truly public and ministered to the interests of a great variety of readers. They offered unusual facilities for study to serious scholars, and they provided entertainment and a means of education through reading, lectures, and discussions to the general public. The city library at Baṣra, in the fifth century after Mohammed, which al-Ḥarīrī characterized as "the counsel-hall of the cultured, the meeting place of townsfolk and strangers," was by no means unique.<sup>1</sup>

It is both unnecessary and impossible to describe here the libraries of the world into which Islām spread, but it will not be amiss to remind ourselves of some of the great repositories of learning which the Arabs found, and which served them as the patterns on which they modeled their own "houses of books."

Ever since 1663, when Pococke published the Arabic text of the *Dynasties* by Abū'l Faraj (Barhebraeus) with a Latin translation, there has been a perennial interest in the account there given of the destruction of the Alexandrian library by the Arabs when they conquered that city in 642 A.D. Renaudot<sup>2</sup> and Gibbon viewed the story with skepticism, and numerous recent scholars, after examining all the

<sup>1</sup> *The Assemblies of al-Ḥarīrī*, trans. T. Chenery and F. Steingass (London, 1867, 1898), I, 114; De Sacy's Arabic text (2d ed.; Paris: Reinaud & Derenbourg, 1847), I, 26 f.

<sup>2</sup> *Hist. Alex. Patriarch.*, p. 170.

available sources in detail, believe it entirely unfounded. But many more have been willing to accept it as true, partly, perhaps, because it is a well-told and on the surface fairly convincing tale, and partly due to prejudice against Mohammedanism. Those who accept it for the latter reason overlook similar charges which Moslems, supported by far more dependable evidence, make against Christians. They point to the destruction of a princely library in Syrian Tripolis at the hands of the Crusaders, and to the burning of the royal library at Granada by Cardinal Ximenez in 1492. In the minds of many non-Arabists the annihilation of the Alexandrian library is the only connection of Arabs with libraries, and hence if for no other reason the affair merits discussion here.

Briefly, the story is that the Arab general ʿAmr became friendly with a famous Christian scholar, John Philoponus, who observed to him that among the treasures of Alexandria the conqueror had left untouched the great library, and since the Arabs were not interested in its contents he asked for the books as a gift. ʿAmr, personally inclined to accede to the request, considered it his duty to refer the matter to his caliph. ʿUmar sent back the brief order, "Touching the books you mention, if what is written in them agrees with the Book of God, they are not required: if it disagrees, they are not desired. Therefore destroy them." Whereupon ʿAmr ordered the books distributed to the four thousand baths of the city, which required six months to consume the precious fuel.<sup>3</sup>

As A. J. Butler points out,<sup>4</sup> the chief argument for the authenticity of the story is its picturesqueness and the true oriental flavor of ʿUmar's reply. The latter somewhat loses its force when one is reminded that Ibn Khaldūn places the same words in the mouth of this caliph in response to the inquiry of another general as to the proper disposal of books found in the course of his Persian conquests.<sup>5</sup>

Probably some Western readers have been inclined to believe the report just because it is found in Arabic sources. However, the total lack of contemporary references to the supposed event, especially in

<sup>3</sup> Abū'l-Faraj (Barhebraeus), *Historia compendiosa dynastiarum historiam complectens universalem, etc.*, ed. E. Pococke (Oxford, 1663), trans., p. 114; Arabic text, pp. 180 f.

<sup>4</sup> *Arab Conquest of Egypt* (Oxford, 1902), p. 403.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *Prolegomena*. Quatremère's text in *Notices et extraits*, XVIII, 89 f.; De Slane (trans.), XXI, 124 f.; ed. Bulaq (1274/1857), p. 234, ll. 3 f.

such writings as that of a Coptic bishop, John of Nikiou, who, writing before the end of the seventh century, gives minute details of the capture of the city, is significant. Further, the first Arabic reference to the incident, so far as we can judge from extant literature, comes from the twelfth century, approximately six hundred years after the event. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf (d. 1231 A.D.), who went to Egypt in 1193, wrote a description of that country some time after 1202, in which he makes passing allusion to “the library which ‘Amr burned with ‘Umar’s permission.”<sup>6</sup> The first detailed account is given by the Egyptian historian Ibn al-Ḳiftī (d. 1248 A.D.), the existing summary of whose work, generally called *Tarīkh al-Ḥukamā’*, was made by al-Zauzanī the year after the author’s death.<sup>7</sup> Shortly before his death in 1286 Abu’l-Faraj, the great Syrian Christian scholar, prepared an Arabic abridgment of the first half of his great Syriac Chronicle, to which he added a summary of biblical history and an account of Arabic scientific literature. For the latter he drew greatly on Ibn al-Ḳiftī, from whom he copied word for word the much-quoted fate of the Alexandrian library.<sup>8</sup> Thereafter Arabic and Coptic writers refer to the matter frequently. Picturesque as the story is, it will not bear close scrutiny.

It is most unlikely that if ‘Amr had been ordered to destroy the books he would have troubled to dole them out to the baths of the city—an arrangement entailing considerable work and a delay which would have given ardent bibliophiles every opportunity to make away with many of the most valuable manuscripts. The picture of four thousand baths ablaze with books for six months is the very stuff of fairy tales, and is characteristic of the fabulous numbers so dear to the heart of oriental story-tellers. An even more serious discrepancy is the part supposedly played by John Philoponus, for it is known that he was writing as early as 540, and possibly before the accession of Justinian in 527, over a century before Alexandria fell into the hands of the Arabs in 642. And, finally, scholars have shown that it is highly improbable that the library survived until this date.

The history of the Museum and its successor the Serapium is fraught with many problems which need not be discussed here. Nor

<sup>6</sup> *Relation de L’Egypte par ‘Abd Allatif*, ed. De Sacy (Paris, 1810), p. 183. See editor’s long note, pp. 240–44, n. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ed. Lippert (Leipzig, 1903), pp. 354–56.

<sup>8</sup> See Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science* (Baltimore, 1931), II, 976.

shall we detain ourselves with an examination of the sources. For complete details the reader may refer to some of the complete studies of the subject.<sup>9</sup> However, certain conclusions which are pertinent to our problem are fairly clearly established. The Museum, of which the great library was a part, seems to have been planned and possibly begun by Ptolemy Soter, whose successor, Philadelphus, completed its equipment and organization about the middle of the third century B.C. It is generally supposed that the library suffered and perhaps was destroyed in the conflagration which spread in the Bruchion quarter as a result of the burning of the harbor by Julius Caesar in 48 B.C. Scholars, however, continued to frequent the Museum, at least until 216 A.D., when Caracalla suppressed the common hall. The institution came to an end in 273, when Aurelian destroyed all the buildings. Sometime early in the Christian Era a new library grew up in connection with the great temple of Serapis. Some suppose that the royal library of Pergamus which Mark Antony carried off to present to Cleopatra, a few years after the fire in 48 B.C., furnished the nucleus for this new collection. Others, among them Butler, hold that Cleopatra placed her books in the Caesarion, begun during her reign and finished by Augustus, for the libraries of that temple are referred to occasionally. The Caesarion was plundered in 366 A.D. It is worthy of note that Ammianus Marcellinus speaks of numerous libraries in Alexandria.

At any rate, it is quite clear that by the fourth century the older Museum had disappeared and in its place was the daughter-institution, the Serapium, which continued its traditions as a scientific and literary academy. In 391 the latter was plundered and demolished by the Christians, to whom the great image of Serapis and its cult had long been hateful. There is no positive evidence that the library perished at this time. Rufinus, an eyewitness who gives considerable detail on the destruction of the temple, makes no mention of the fate of the library. His silence has led some scholars to suppose that the books were kept in other buildings on the Acropolis and thereby survived the catastrophe. But from the remarks of Aphthonius, who visited the

<sup>9</sup> Butler, *op. cit.*, Appen. and Bibliog.; also P. Casanova, 'L'incendie de la bibliothèque d'Alexandrie,' *Comp. rend. de l'Acad. des Inscriptions*, 1923, pp. 163-71; G. Parthey, *Das Alexandrinische Museum* (Berlin, 1838).

Serapium not long before the events of 391, it is evident that the library was associated with the temple building and was still frequented by men of learning. Hence it is most likely that it was destroyed along with the temple proper. There is also little reason for accepting the suggestion that the books were removed and shipped to Constantinople, for the frenzied mob, whose sole desire was to wipe out idolatry and all its accompaniments, can scarcely be supposed to have given thought to the value of pagan literature. The much-discussed lament of Orosius on the empty bookshelves is evidence that in 416 there were no longer any large and ancient libraries in Alexandria.<sup>10</sup>

The total lack of any references to such libraries in all subsequent writings, both previous to and in the centuries following the Arab conquest, can only be interpreted as mute testimony to their disappearance. Above all, we should expect John Moschus and his friend Sophronius, who evince a passionate interest in all matters relating to books and who do describe lesser libraries they saw, to have mentioned the Serapium library if it was still in existence. They visited Egypt a few years before the coming of the Arabs in 642.

Some writers have attempted to clear Abū'l-Faraj of responsibility for the famous report of the destruction of the Alexandrian library. They point out that it does not appear in the Syriac original of his history and hence hold it to be a late interpolation in the Arabic.<sup>11</sup> However, we have seen that Abū'l-Faraj is responsible for the Arabic epitome of his work and the additions to it. Its absence in the Beirut edition<sup>12</sup> is due to the red pencil of the Turkish censor rather than to a difference in manuscripts. This passage as well as several others lacking in this edition are on the proof sheets which were sent me by the director of the Catholic Press of Beirut in response to my inquiry. The manuscript used by Pococke is fairly late,<sup>13</sup> but was collated by the more recent editor with other manuscripts, all of which include the incident in question.

<sup>10</sup> See a discussion of this by Butler, *op. cit.*, pp. 420 f.

<sup>11</sup> See R. Vasudeva Rau, "Did Omar Destroy the Alexandrian Library?" *Nineteenth Century*, October, 1894, pp. 560 f. This author supposed the story to be of Christian origin. He is apparently unaware of its mention by Ibn al-Kifā'i.

<sup>12</sup> Ed. Ṣāḥḥānī (1890).

<sup>13</sup> Written 861/1457. See *Bodleian Catalogue*, No. 96: *Catalogi codicum manuscriptorum orientalium bibliothecae Bodleianae* (Oxford: Nicoll, Pusey, 1835), Part II.



At any rate, the problem of its existence in Abū'l-Faraj's history is of secondary importance, for it is evident from the statements of two Moslems, Ibn al-Ḳiṭī and ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, that the tradition was current in Arabic literature. Neither will Bury's argument<sup>14</sup> that Abū'l-Faraj did not use the word "library" but *libri philosophici qui in gazophilaciis regis reperiuntur* get us out of the difficulty. The Arabic which Pococke so translated is *khazā'in al-mulūk*<sup>15</sup>. This phrase means literally "royal treasuries or collections"; *khazā'in* and its singular, *khizāna*, can mean simply "treasuries," "stores," "collections." A library is specifically *khizānat al-kutub* ("collection of books"), but Arabic writers quite frequently omit the word "books" when the context makes it clear, as it does here, that "collections of books" are meant. So the *Fihrist*<sup>16</sup> quotes a man as saying, "In my *Khizāna* at Baṣra among his books are . . . ." Of course one can legitimately argue that the royal library or collections does not necessarily refer to the great library of the Museum or Serapium, but we have just seen that there is no evidence that any great libraries survived the depredations of the Christians.

It therefore seems quite clear that there arose—why we do not know, but apparently in Egypt not later than the first half of the thirteenth century—this story that ʿAmr, on the order of the second caliph, destroyed a great library of royal foundation in Alexandria, and that although it was believed and recounted both by Christian and by Moslem historians, it is utterly groundless. The fact that Arabic writers should have perpetuated such a reflection on their forefathers speaks for their candor if not for their critical judgment.

Possibly the story arose among a group of scholarly but heretical Moslems who greatly admired the remnants of Greek learning but regretted that so few survived and at the same time had little use for the early caliphs. One can quite well imagine such among the ranks of Ismāʿīlī *savants* who frequented the court of the Fāṭimids, whose heretical caliphate in Egypt was brought to an end by Saladin in 567/1171. As partisans of the house of ʿAlī, whom they believed foully prevented from succeeding Mohammed as the true head of the Mos-

<sup>14</sup> P. 454, n. 141, to his edition of Gibbon.

<sup>15</sup> Pococke trans., p. 114; Arabic text, p. 181.

<sup>16</sup> Ed. Flügel (Leipzig, 1871), p. 139, l. 3.

lem state, they would have felt no scruples against representing ʿUmar and his envoy as ignorant vandals. We know that the academy and library founded and supported by the Fāṭimid caliphs at Cairo was definitely modeled on the Museum or Serapium and that there sciences, of Greek origin, and literature were cultivated along with strictly religious studies. This institution was closed by Saladin and the books from its library were scattered all over Egypt and Syria. Or is it too far-fetched to imagine that the story may be no older than this event and took form as a protest or a bit of literary revenge on the part of some deposed scholar of the Fāṭimid House of Science? Saladin's victory spelled the triumph of orthodoxy in Egypt, and in place of the essentially liberal and diversified studies of the academy there arose numerous *madrasas*, or theological schools, devoted almost exclusively to problems of Koranic exegesis, theology, and canon law. One can quite easily picture some disgruntled Fellow of the old academy viewing the limited interests of these new schools with dismay, saying, "So it has always been with the orthodox; they have no appreciation of true learning. Today their general Saladin closes our school and scatters our books and so the general of ʿUmar, may Allāh curse him, destroyed the academy and the books of the ancients."

The story, then, may be supposed to have circulated—perhaps underground—in Egypt, where it was picked up by ʿAbd al-Laṭīf with his fondness for antiquities, and by Ibn al-Kifṭī with his interest in philosophy and philosophers and translations from the Greek, and accepted as a plausible explanation for the loss of books known only by name. There is good evidence that serious Arabic scholars were aware that they did not possess the full body of Greek literature.

This hypothesis is frankly an imaginative construction for which there is no direct evidence, but it is offered as a possible explanation of the origin of a curious story which has aroused endless discussion.

In reviewing the history of the Alexandrian Museum and library the present writer was struck with the great similarity of its purpose and activities to that of some of the great academies and libraries of Moslem foundation. Most of the higher education of Mohammedans has always been carried on in mosques and *madrasas*. In the earliest days of Islām this was done quite informally; the mosque was the natural meeting-place of the faithful, a civic as well as religious center. The

prophet was hardly dead before eager listeners began to gather about his former companions after prayers to hear them recite his words or recount his deeds. In time these companions became the first teachers of Islām and the mosques were their classrooms. The practice of teachers lecturing and answering questions in mosques has continued to the present. Chairs in different departments of Moslem learning were endowed, and in many places the mosque school took on the semblance of a university. Books were presented and many a scholar bequeathed his library to the mosque of his city, both to insure its preservation and to render the books accessible to the learned who frequented it. And so grew up the great universities of Cordova and Toledo to which flocked Christians as well as Moslems from all over the world, and the famous al-Azhar in Cairo, which after almost a thousand years is still the most famous educational center of the Mohammedan world. *Madrasas* or theological colleges arose later, one of the earliest and probably the most influential was the Nizāmiya in Bagdad, established by the *wazīr* Nizām al-Mulk in 457/1065. These institutions were founded and endowed for strictly educational purposes. On the whole their curriculums were limited to religious subjects, to which were added such philological and historical studies as were needed for Koranic exegesis and the exposition of canon law. Medicine seems to have been the only secular study included. These colleges also had their libraries, containing such works as were needed by their students and their professors.

But there were also other institutions of a more secular sort. The first was the House of Wisdom (*bait al-ḥikma*) founded by the Abbasid caliph, al-Maʿmūn, in Bagdad early in the ninth century A.D. Al-Maʿmūn was an ardent exponent of Muʿtazilite theology, a highly rationalistic system of thought, which left a lasting impression on Moslem dogmatic theology long after it had spent itself and disappeared, only to be remembered as one of the great heresies. With the great emphasis which Muʿtazilites placed on the importance of human reason as a means of ascertaining the truth, it is only natural that they should have been attracted by the products of rational thought among peoples of the past. Hence they were eager students of Greek philosophy and science and probably the first readers of the great works translated under the patronage of al-Maʿmūn and his son al-Wāthiq.

We shall see later how al-Ma'mūn, like his father Hārūn al-Rashīd, spared no pains or expense collecting and translating works on science and philosophy of Greek, Persian, and Indian origin. They were also interested in other phases of literature; poetry, stories, and that class of writings known as *adab* (*belles-lettres*) which has been so exceedingly popular in Arabic-speaking countries, all found their places in the libraries of these enlightened caliphs. It is to their lasting credit that they were not satisfied to restrict their marvelous collections to their own use, but made them the center of the academy, or House of Wisdom, founded by al-Ma'mūn. There were gathered translators and scholars of every sort, who not only used the books for their private studies but met for discussions and experimental research. A very important feature of the House of Wisdom was its astronomical observatory, in which were compiled the celebrated "Verified Tables." None of the then known sciences was neglected.

Another academy which also bore the name of the House of Wisdom, or Abode of Science, was that founded by the *wazīr* Sābūr Ibn Ardashīr in 381 or 383/993-94. Its activities seem to have been literary and philosophical rather than scientific. Most of the great poets and men of letters of the day sought at one time or another to enjoy its hospitality and stimulating discussions. The famous skeptic and poet Abū'l-ʿAlā al-Maʿarrī journeyed from his home in Syria to become a member of this academy for a time. Long afterward he spoke in letters and verse of his longing to take part in those brilliant assemblies once more. In one of his poems occurs the line, "And in the house of Sābūr a sprightly songstress enlivened our evenings with a voice as melodious as a dove's."<sup>17</sup> An unusually fine library was a part of the original foundation and contained rare and beautiful books which later were plundered. Yāqūt refers to it as the "Ancient Library."<sup>18</sup> There is some evidence that the Shiʿite poet, the *Sharīf* al-Raḍī, founded a similar academy also in Bagdad in imitation of Sābūr's. The *Sharīf* (b. 359/970; d. 407/1016) was a contemporary and encomiast of Sābūr ibn Ardashīr.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Sakī al-Zand*, II, 51, l. 12. Quoted by Ibn Khallikān, *Biographical Dictionary*, trans. De Slane (Paris, 1843), I, 555.

<sup>18</sup> *Biographical Dictionary* ("Gibb Series," Vol. VI), p. 358; Yāqūt, *Geographical Dictionary*, ed. Wüstenfeld, I, 799.

<sup>19</sup> See *Letters of Abū'l-ʿAlā*, ed. Margoliouth (Oxford, 1898); prefaced Biog., pp. xxiii f., which refers to the Introduction to the *Diwān* of al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (Beirut, 1307 A.H.).

Bagdad, however, was not the only city in which were to be found such academies. We read of a learned jurist and poet of Mosul, Jaʿfar ibn Muḥammad ibn Hamdan al Mawṣilī (man of Mawṣil = Mosul; d. 323), who owned a *dar al-ʿilm* ("abode of science") in which was a library containing works of a great variety. There he provided facilities for those who would study, including free paper for the poor. He lectured on law, literary history, and poetry to all who would listen. Hence it would appear that his academy, like Sābūr's, was devoted to literary matters.<sup>20</sup>

Two other men of culture and learning, probably in imitation of the caliphs Hārūn al-Rashīd and al-Maʾmūn, called their libraries their "treasuries of wisdom" (*khizānat al-ḥikma*). One was ʿAlī ibn Yaḥyā ibn al-Munajjim, whose father was an astronomer in the employ of al-Maʾmūn, who converted him to Islām, hence of course to that of the Muʿtazilite persuasion. The son, a singer of merit and a translator and patron of translators, had at his country seat an unusual library to the use of which he admitted other scholars. One of them, Abū Maʿshar, a much-quoted astronomer of Khurāsān, on his way to the pilgrimage at Mecca stopped to use the library of Ibn al-Munajjim and became so engrossed in the treasures there that he cared not whether he ever completed the pilgrimage. His heretical tendencies are traced to this event.<sup>21</sup>

Ibn al-Munajjim's own library, as well as his taste in literature and his ability to collect outstanding works, was so famous that the book-loving courtier Faṭḥ ibn Khāḳān engaged him to assemble a library which is also referred to as a "treasury of wisdom."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Yāḳūt, *Biog. Dict.*, II, 420.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 467; see also *Fihrist*, p. 143, and Ibn abī Uṣaybīʿa, *ʿUyūn al-anbaʿ*, ed. Müller (1884), I, 205.

<sup>22</sup> Yāḳūt, *op. cit.*; *Fihrist*, p. 143; Ibn Khallikān, *op. cit.*, II, 312.

[To be continued]



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## BACKGROUND OF THE HISTORY OF MOSLEM LIBRARIES—*Continued*

RUTH STELLHORN MACKENSEN

In Egypt the heretical caliphs known as the Fāṭimids ruled from 909 to 1171 A.D. They were supporters of the Ismā'īlī variety of the Shī'ites, the largest and best-known heresy in Islām. The adherents of this sect anathematized the orthodox caliphs, whom they believed to have unjustly supplanted ʿAlī, fourth caliph and husband of Mohammed's daughter Fāṭima, whose posterity they hold are the only legitimate successors of the prophet. The Fāṭimids claim descent from one of the sons of this marriage. This is hardly the place for a discussion of the doctrines peculiar to this sect, the chief of which are that of the Imāmate as the spiritual as well as secular leadership of Islām and a mass of allegorical interpretations of the Koran with an esoteric flavor. They also possess their own body of tradition, distinct from that of the orthodox. Theologically, however, they are largely Mu'tazilite and, like the doctors of that earlier heresy, though perhaps in a less thoroughgoing fashion, the Fāṭimids placed considerable emphasis on reason. Several caliphs of this dynasty were devoted to learning. From the beginning of their rule in Cairo they appear to have been in the habit of holding informal gatherings with men of learning for the discussion of religious and other matters. The *wazīr* of al-ʿAzīz, a converted Jew by the name of Yaḳūb ibn Killis, imitated the example of his master and drew to his court scholars, poets, and orators. His *salon* or *majlis* took on the aspects of an academy similar to those of al-Ma'mūn and Sābūr at Bagdad. He supported his proteges in comfort and some even in luxury, and permitted them the use of his library, perhaps largely built up of the writings of his numerous satellites. There is preserved a description of the weekly meetings of this *majlis* where poets recited their latest effusions in his honor, doctors debated the various topics in which they were learned, and the eloquent vied to produce the most artistic and impressive orations. Thereafter their patron rewarded them according to their several merits.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Maḳrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, ed. Bulāḳ (1270 A.H.), II, 5 f.; Ibn Khallikān, *op. cit.*, IV, 359 ff.; Arabic text (Cairo, 1312 A.H.), II, 334.

Under al-Ḥākim, the sixth Fāṭimid caliph, a strange man in whom were mixed a great love of learning and a mad fanaticism, the assemblies of his predecessors crystallized into an academy, which, like that of al-Ma'mūn, is variously called the "House of Wisdom" (*bait al-ḥikma*) or "Abode of Science" (*dar al-ilm*). This institution, founded in 395/1005, became at once the center of Ismā'īlī propaganda and a school of science and literature. To its library the caliph transferred a large quantity of valuable books from the royal collections; it was open not only to the Fellows of the academy but also to the general public. Free writing materials were provided to all, and lodging, meals, and stipends to those who wished to remain a time for study. Like the earlier *Bait al-Ḥikma* in Bagdad, this academy encouraged the advancement of the sciences and the production of various forms of literature.<sup>24</sup>

Limited as is this sketch of these academies, it will serve to show their striking resemblances to the ancient Greek Museum and the Library of the Ptolemies in Alexandria and to its daughter the Serapium. This can hardly be accidental. There is, first of all the exaltation of philosophy, science, and literature, not to the exclusion of religious matters, but certainly to an extent which contrasts markedly with the educational activities of the mosques and madrasas. There is also the royal patronage of scholars and men of letters, with provisions to house and maintain them in sufficient comfort and ease that they might devote themselves to study and creative work. In all these academies as in the Museum there was a lively interest in the exchange of thought through assemblies for discussion, lectures, debates, and other competitive performances. The library in each and every case was an integral part of the foundation. It was not a mere storehouse and reading-room, but a working library in every sense. Especially in that of al-Ma'mūn, the work of translating was of primary importance. To a lesser extent this may also have been carried on at Cairo. In any case every effort was made to render the books as accessible as possible. Books were kept in good repair, copies were multiplied, we read of a catalogue being prepared for the royal library of Cairo in the year 435/1043-44,<sup>25</sup> and, as we have seen, every convenience was of-

<sup>24</sup> Maḳrīzī, *op. cit.*, I, 408, 409, 445, 458 f.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn al-Kifṭī, *op. cit.*, p. 440. Whether this reference is to the library of the *dār al-Ilm* or to the private collection of the Fāṭimid caliphs is uncertain.



ferred to those who wished to copy manuscripts for their own possession. Not a few writers mention gathering material in these several libraries. For example, al-Nadīm, the author of that invaluable bibliographical work, the *Fihrist*,<sup>26</sup> refers so often to items which he consulted in the library of al-Ma'mūn that one scholar has supposed his work was the catalogue of that library—an opinion which for various reasons cannot be supported.

One other striking similarity to the Alexandrian library deserves mention. We have preserved for us the names of several outstanding men of letters who served at various times as librarians of Ptolemy's foundation, and we find that Moslem bibliophiles likewise chose men of unusual attainment as custodians of their libraries. In fact, much of the splendid activity of Arabic libraries is probably due to the quality of men who were pleased to act as librarians. It speaks highly for the generosity of the patrons as well as for the really important work carried on in these libraries that men of marked ability in various fields felt it worth their while to undertake the duties of custodian. The *Fihrist* mentions three librarians who served at one time in the first House of Wisdom in Bagdad.<sup>27</sup> All three were well-known authors and translators of Greek or Persian works. One of them, Sahl ibn Hārūn, is remembered for his political as well as his literary activities. We also know considerable about a man who headed the academy of Sābūr, al-Murṭada, a man of influence in Shī'ite circles, and the names of two librarians who were authors.<sup>28</sup> Both were correspondents of Abū 'Alā al-Ma'arri, to whom are addressed letters preserved in the charming and interesting collection of letters of the Syrian poet.<sup>29</sup> The judge 'Abd al-'Azīz, a member of a distinguished al-Nu'mān family, which furnished the Fāṭimid caliphs with a series of able jurists, was appointed head of the *dār al-ilm*, for which he collected a large library.<sup>30</sup> His grandfather, also a judge, and the confidant of the first four caliphs of this dynasty and a prolific writer on legal and theological matters, in his early days devoted himself to the

<sup>26</sup> Written in the fourth century A.H.

<sup>27</sup> Pp. 120, 125, 305; Ibn Khallikān, trans. De Slane, I, 509 f.

<sup>28</sup> *Letters of Abū'l-'Alā*, Letter XVI, and *Saḥī al-Zand*, II, 100, 101, 112; also Letter XIX; Yāqūt, *Biog. Dict.*, VI, 358 ff.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> R. Gottheil, "A Distinguished Family of Fāṭimid Cadis in the Tenth Century," *J.A.O.S.*, 1907, pp. 235 f.

collection, preservation, and copying of books for the royal house.<sup>31</sup> Al-Shabustī, author of *The Book of Monasteries* (d. 390/1000), served as librarian and reader for the caliph al-ʿAzīz.<sup>32</sup> The *wazīr* Abū Qāsim ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad (d. 435/1044) was the head either of the royal library or that of the *dār al-ʿilm*, the immediate supervision of which he intrusted to the deputy Kadi Abū ʿAbd Allāh and a stationer.<sup>33</sup> Technical aspects of the workings of these libraries, such as methods of shelving, classifying, and cataloguing books, were probably also derived ultimately from the practices of Greek libraries in Egypt.

If these resemblances to the Museum and its library at Alexandria are not accidental (and it certainly does not seem that they can be), how are they to be accounted for? We have no mention in any Arabic work of a conscious attempt to imitate the ancient Greek institution, but it is certain that Moslem scholars knew at least something about it. The *Fihrist*,<sup>34</sup> quoting the history of a certain Ishāk al-Rāhib, mentions that Ptolemy Philadelphus sought out books on science, collected 54,120 volumes, and placed them in the care of a man called Zamīrah, who Flügel suggests may be Demetrius (Phalereus).<sup>35</sup> Other writers, including Ibn al-Ḳifṭī, used this information. The very fact that Arabic historians felt the need of accounting for the disappearance of the ancient library shows that they were fully aware of its importance. Along with the numerous Greek works which were translated into Arabic, is it not more than likely that there was some record of this famous academy and library which did so much to preserve and propagate Greek learning in the East? The unidentified history of Ishāk al-Rāhib possibly was the source of more information than the scrap quoted in the *Fihrist*.

What could have been more natural than that those who were so devoted to Greek philosophy and science that they spared no pains or expense to collect and render the writings of the ancients accessible to

<sup>31</sup> Asaf A. A. Fyzee, "Qāḍī an-Nuʿmān," *JRAS*, January, 1934, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Khallikān, trans., De Slane, II, 262.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn al-Ḳifṭī, *op. cit.*, p. 440.

<sup>34</sup> Pp. 239 f. A modern Arabic writer, Jirji Zaidan, who defends the authenticity of the account given by Ibn al-Ḳifṭī and Abū'l-Faraj, supposes that it came from this history of Ishāk al-Rāhib. See his *Ta'rikh al-Tamaddun al-Islāmi* ("History of Islamic Civilization") (Cairo, 1904), III, 40-46; a résumé of this in English by Isya Joseph, "Bar Hebraeus and the Alexandrian Library," *AJSL*, XXVII, 335-38.

<sup>35</sup> See p. 240, in his edition of the *Fihrist*.

the Arabic-speaking world should have consciously sought to model their institutions on the older academy and library? We know that al-Maʾmūn continued by his generous patronage a school at Jundīshāpūr, which from the time of its founder, the Sasanid Khusraw Anu-shirwan, was devoted to Greek studies. Likewise the pagan city Harran furnished Bagdad with a series of able Greek scholars who helped translate the works of the ancients into Arabic. Syrian Christians, who were long in communication with Egypt, were also intermediaries for the transmission of Greek learning. Through these channels may have come traditions of the Museum and Serapium. And in Cairo it is very probable that the Fāṭimids had access to memories and possibly to actual records of the school of nearby Alexandria. The parallels between it and the Abode of Science founded by al-Ḥākim are most striking. But it is also probable that through the Muʿtazilite contributions to Shīʿite theology and the use of translations made at Bagdad they also obtained traditions of the Museum. The use of the same name, House of Wisdom, or its alternative title, Abode of Science, which is almost synonymous, is evidence of some relationship between the academies of Bagdad and Cairo. Are not these names—House of Wisdom and Abode of Science—Arabic approximations to the Greek *μουσεῖον*, a place of the Muses, or place dedicated to the Muses? The mythological reference in the word “Muses” would have been repugnant to Moslem taste, even to such a lover of all things Greek as al-Maʾmūn, but he could well have used the idea which the Muses personified, and rendered it into Arabic as “Wisdom” or “Science.” The use of these terms is worth more than passing attention, for they seem to have been used *only* of those academies and libraries which were devoted to profane learning, the three academies of al-Maʾmūn and Sābūr at Bagdad and of the Fāṭimids in Cairo. It is worthy of note that Ibn abī Uṣaibʿa speaks of a pre-Islamic school in Alexandria, probably of Christian foundation, as a *dār al-ʿilm*. There John Philoponus studied grammar, philosophy, and logic. Most significant is Ibn Ḥaukal’s reference to Athens as the “Greek house of wisdom” (*dār ḥikmat al-yūnānīyīn*).<sup>36</sup> The library of Hārūn al-Rashīd, and

<sup>36</sup> Ibn abī Uṣaibʿa, *op. cit.*; Ibn Ḥaukal, *Via et regna: Descriptio ditionis Moslemicae*, ed. De Goeje as Vol. II of *Bibliotheca geographorum Arabicum* (1873), p. 135, l. 14. The continuation of the Greek tradition in the “house of wisdom” is recognized by J. Pedersen, art. “Masdjid,” *Encyc. of Islām*, III, 353.

sometimes that of al-Ma'mūn, are referred to as the "storehouse" or "treasury of wisdom"—a title, as we have seen, used of three private collections: that of Ja'far in Mosul, and those of Ibn al-Munajjim and Faṭḥ ibn Khākān at Bagdad. Ibn al-Munajjim, the son of a convert to Mu'tazilite Islām by the intercession of his caliph, was devoted to astronomy, medicine, and other Greek sciences, and was a patron of translators. The source of the name he chose for his library is apparent. He collected books for the library of Faṭḥ, who himself cannot have been a Mu'tazilite, for he was the intimate of the reactionary caliph, al-Mutawakkil, who suppressed Mu'tazilite doctrine and reinstated orthodoxy as the state religion. Faṭḥ ibn Khākān was, however, a man utterly devoted to learning and polite literature. Theological differences, if they were of more than formal importance to him, do not seem to have deterred him from friendship with Ibn al-Munajjim, although it may be that the latter had forsaken the faith of his father, for he, too, was in favor with al-Mutawakkil. However that may be, both of these bibliophiles were of the company of those whose orthodoxy did not interfere with their love of literature, music, Greek learning, and the convivial wine-cup. They would hardly have hesitated to use the name because of its Mu'tazilite associations. It may have been considered a more elegant or high-sounding appellation than the ordinary terms for "library." On the other hand, the references to the library of Faṭḥ as "treasury of wisdom" are quotations from Ibn al-Munajjim, who speaks in the first person of collecting a library for the royal favorite, and he may simply have slipped into the words he would have used in speaking of his own library. Of the religious leanings of al-Mawṣilī, all that can be said is that he was a lawyer of the Shāfi'ite school, hence he was probably an orthodox Moslem.<sup>37</sup> He was, however, a poet of sorts, a writer of *belles-lettres* and works on law. As he lived 240–323 A.H., his "treasury of science" comes between those of al-Ma'mūn and Sābūr, at a time when an interest in literature and Greek science was much alive. It is noteworthy that Yāqūt speaks of him as learned in the "ancient sciences." Sābūr ibn Ardashīr probably had Shī'ite leanings, for he was a Persian and *wazīr* of an *Amīr* who at least nominally espoused Shī'ite doctrines, and the

<sup>37</sup> Fihrist, p. 149; Yāqūt, *Biog. Dict.*, II. 419.

custodians of his academy seemed always to have been leaders of that schism, among them al-Murṭada.

The fact that these terms are used only of libraries and academies the founders and patrons of which had strong leanings toward secular learning and literature, and especially Greek studies, seems to point conclusively to a tradition of the Museum. Elsewhere libraries are referred to by the Persian term *kitābkhāna*, or its Arabic equivalent, *maktaba*, or as a "treasury of books" (*khizānat al-kutub*) or "house of books" (*bait* or *dār al-kutub*).

It would appear, therefore, whether or not Moslems are responsible for the destruction of the Alexandrian library, some of them were impressed by that for which it stood and took it as a model for their own houses and treasuries of wisdom. In turn these great Arabic libraries exercised a great influence on others in Moslem lands. The methods continued the same, but far more important is the tradition of libraries as living and working centers of learning and literature, and the practice of employing men of outstanding merit as librarians.

In the light of the foregoing, is not the earlier suggestion that the story of the destruction of the Alexandrian library arose as a protest against the closing of the *dār al-ʿilm* in Cairo at least plausible? The history of Moslem traditions contains innumerable instances of the invention of episodes and anecdotes, projected into the past, either as sanctions for later practice or as protests against supposed evils.

Greek learning and books came to the Arabs through several channels. There is no way of knowing how much they had heard or read of Greek libraries other than that at Alexandria, or whether this information spurred them on to form their own collections. Memories of the Syrian temple of the Muses established by Antiochus III at his capital, the library at Pergamum, and the imperial collection of Constantine and his successors may well have passed on to them. These libraries had been situated in the very localities from which early Moslem bibliophiles gathered many of their books on philosophy and the ancient sciences. There is a tradition to the effect that al-Maṣmūn sent a commission to Leo the Armenian to obtain the books he desired for his library.<sup>38</sup> It has even been said that he demanded the books

<sup>38</sup> *Fihrist*, p. 243; Hājji Khalifa, III, 95.

as one of the terms of a treaty he concluded with the emperor. Certainly those who collected Greek manuscripts for the early Abbasid caliphs must have seen libraries. Following the account of the activities of al-Ma'mūn's envoys, the author of the *Fihrist* quotes a description of a marvelous palace which his informer saw three days' journey from Constantinople. In it was a large quantity of ancient books, some very dilapidated, others in good condition.<sup>39</sup>

In the very heart of the Moslem Empire were two great centers of Greek learning which were of inestimable importance for the transmission of the ancient culture to the Arabs. From the time of Alexander the city of Harran had been under Greek influence. Its inhabitants never accepted Christianity, and it remained the last stronghold of paganism, a refuge for many who clung to Hellenistic traditions. Nor did the Harranians succumb to the preaching of Islām. Combined with Greek studies, Babylonian science, chiefly astronomy, lingered on at Harran and passed to the conquerors during the days of the first Abbasids, for that city long supplied Bagdad with a stream of able scholars. The best-known names are those of Thābit ibn Qurra (d. 901 A.D.) and his numerous relatives. A glance at the series of biographical sketches collected by Chwolson in his invaluable study of the Harranians gives one some idea of the activities of these versatile pagans who served the early caliphs of Bagdad.<sup>40</sup> Their translations of works on philosophy, ethics, politics, history, medicine, mathematics, and astronomy furnished Moslem libraries with some of their most precious possessions.

It may seem strange that paganism survived openly in the very heart of Islām. Arabic writers frequently refer to the people of Harran as Šābians (al-Šābi'a), and consequently scholars have attempted to distinguish between the pagan Šābians and the Mandaeans or true Šābians, who inhabit the marshes between Wasit and Basra. Chwolson believed that the clue to the confusion between these two apparently unconnected groups was to be found in a story in the *Fihrist*. This tells, on the authority of an almost contemporary Christian writer, how the inhabitants of Harran protected themselves from

<sup>39</sup> *Fihrist*, p. 243, quoted by Ibn Abī Uṣaibi'a, *op. cit.*, I, 186.

<sup>40</sup> *Die Sabier und der Sabismus* (St. Petersburg, 1856), Buch I, Kap. xii; see also Carra de Vaux, art. "Al-Šābi'a," *Ency. Islām*; Browne, *Literary History of Persia* (Cambridge, 1929), I, 302-6.

the persecutions of al-Ma'mūn by claiming to be Šābians, having been informed that such was the name of one of the sects tolerated by Mohammed as a "people of the book." This reference is to the Prophet's respect for religions possessing scriptures. Their ruse having succeeded, they appropriated a name to which they had no right and obtained the privilege of continuing in their old ways. More recently, Pedersen has contended that *Šābi'a* is not the special title of any single sect, but that it is a common name for the numerous and scattered gnostic sects. He regards *Šābi'a* as synonymous with *Ḥanīf*, a word used in the Koran for religiously minded men, and holds that *Ḥanīf* and *Šābi'a* stand in the same relation as "Hellenistic" and "gnostic" in our usage. If such is the case, the Harranians were within their rights when they used the name.<sup>41</sup>

It was mentioned earlier that Ibn Khaldūn attributed the famous command of 'Umar for the destruction of books to the time of the Persian conquest.<sup>42</sup> According to this report, General Sa'd ibn abi Waqqāš inquired of the caliph as to the disposition of the many books found in that country. 'Umar sent the familiar answer, adding, "So throw them into the water or the fire." No place is specified, but the incident is often supposed to refer to the royal library of Chosroes at Ctesiphon. If the report of Ibn Khaldūn is founded on fact, it would rather imply that considerable quantities of books were found at several places. 'Umar's order may be apocryphal; we have seen how it was used to account for the disappearance of the Alexandrian library; but it was true to the temper of many of the early leaders of Islām, for whom the Koran contained all knowledge needful for man. Just as the religion of the Prophet superseded all others, so too his book rendered others unnecessary. It is certain that the Moslem conquerors found books in Persia, for the Persians had long been not only a literate people but also possessed an ancient culture. A fourth-century historian, al-Mas'ūdī, utilized the Arabic translation of a Persian book on science and history which had once belonged to the royal Persian library and had been taken as loot in the early wars of con-

<sup>41</sup> *Fihrist*, pp. 320 f.; J. Pedersen, art. "The Šabians," *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to E. G. Browne* (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 383 ff.

<sup>42</sup> See the first instalment of this article in *AJSL*, LI, No. 2 (January, 1935), 117.

quest.<sup>43</sup> Many of the first scholars of Islām were Persians, and that people continued to contribute to Moslem learning and literature. In many ways the court at Bagdad was essentially a Persian court, for several of the caliphs had strong Persian sympathies and not a few *wazīrs* and other courtiers belonged to that nation.

The *Fihrist* speaks of the intellectual interests of the Sasanid rulers, typified by the activities of Ardashīr the son of Bābak, his son Sābūr, and Khusraw Anushirwan, who caused books on philosophy and the ancient sciences to be brought from India, China, and Byzantium.<sup>44</sup> Khusraw Anushirwan, whom Browne characterized as one of the greatest and best rulers of Persia, reigned from 531 to 578 A.D. His reception of seven neo-Platonist philosophers who had been expelled from their homes, and his insistence that they be assured of toleration and freedom from interference, is well known. Their future safety, after their return to their native land, was one of the terms of the treaty he concluded with the Byzantines. Browne emphasized the important and lasting influence of the visit of these Greek philosophers to the Persian court, believing that Persian mysticism, which passed over into Islām, was colored by their teachings.<sup>45</sup>

Strictly Persian studies, especially of history and jurisprudence, were also cultivated, including the compilation of the annals which furnished the sources for Firdawsī's *Shāh-nāma*. Indian literature also received attention; the *Fables of Bidpai* and the game of chess were brought to Persia.<sup>46</sup> Several of the Sasanids exercised considerable religious tolerance. Syriac historians record that Khusraw Pārwez (ruled 590–628 A.D.) requested the Catholicos of the time to set down the articles of the Nestorian faith for him, and so a company of learned men was sent who drew up a confession of faith for the king.<sup>47</sup>

The concern of Persian kings for the safekeeping of scientific books was evidently well known and was illustrated by the author of the *Fihrist* in an ancient story he quoted from Abū Ma'shar the astronomer. One Tahmūrath, being warned 231 years before the Deluge of

<sup>43</sup> *Kitāb al-Tanbih*, ed. De Goeje (Leyden, 1894), p. 106.

<sup>44</sup> *Fihrist*, p. 239.

<sup>45</sup> *Op. cit.*, I, 166 f.

<sup>46</sup> G. Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science*, I, 435 f.

<sup>47</sup> *Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar 'Idta*, ed. and trans. from Syriac by E. A. W. Budge (London, 1902), II. (trans.), Part I, 210–12; Syriac text, pp. 141 f.



that oncoming catastrophe, sought the most durable materials on which to have these precious works transcribed. He finally decided on birch and other barks as the hardest, smoothest and least likely to mold and decay, such being the experience of the people of India and China, who favored this writing material. A commission was then appointed to find the most suitable place for the housing of the manuscripts. After a considerable survey of likely sites, the town of Jayy, a suburb of Isfahan, was chosen because of its elevation, the excellence and dryness of the soil, the pureness of the air, and the unlikelihood of earthquakes and other catastrophes. The building lasted for centuries, but the presence of the library was apparently unsuspected by Moslems until it was revealed by the collapse of a vault in the year 350 after the Hijra. The words of the *Fihrist* seem to imply that the books were hidden in chests in walled-up vaults. Abū Maʿshar says they were in ancient Persian writing, and one was found who could read them. Al-Birūnī, who gives a shortened form of the report, says that they could not be deciphered, but al-Nadīm held that the most trustworthy information is that they were in Greek and were translated subsequently. The manuscripts, or their bindings, which were finally abandoned, smelled foully, but after they were taken to Bagdad they finally dried out and were usable. Some, or possibly only one of them, were in the possession of Abū Sulaiman, a teacher of al-Nadīm, the author of the *Fihrist*. The latter says that the building which housed the books was reputed to have been comparable to the pyramids of Egypt. Ignoring the extravagant date of 231 before the Deluge, the story probably preserves the record of an ancient Persian library which was unearthed not many years before the writing of the *Fihrist*. Al-Nadīm's statement that the manuscripts were written in Greek implies a collection of books made during the Sasanid period. Even the report of Abū Maʿshar that they were in ancient Persian writing which some were able to read would indicate that they came from a time not long before the Moslem conquest.<sup>48</sup>

The efforts of Khusraw Anushirwan in behalf of learning left their most lasting influence in the medical school at Jundishāpūr, the foundation of which is often attributed to him. However, this institu-

<sup>48</sup> *Fihrist*, pp. 240 f.; briefer accounts are given by al-Birūnī, *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, ed. and trans. by E. Sachau (London, 1879), p. 28; and E. G. Browne, art. "An Account of the Rare Manuscript History of Isfahan Presented to the Royal Asiatic Society, May 19, 1827, by Sir John Malcolm," *JRAS*, 1901, p. 417.

tion was probably in existence long before his day, and in time broadened its scope to become a university which lasted far into the days of the Abbasids. The town of Jundīshāpūr was founded by Shāpūr I (241–71 A.D.), who settled it with Greek prisoners. It was a place of refuge for the Nestorians driven from Edessa in 489, and the neo-Platonists, expelled from Athens in 529, there found an asylum with the enlightened king. It became a notable intellectual center, where Greek, Jewish, Syrian, Hindu, Persian, and perhaps Chinese scholars met for discussion and mutual help. Scientific and philosophical writings were translated into Persian and, in Moslem times, into Arabic. The medical studies and research carried on at Jundīshāpūr left a permanent influence on Arabic medicine. Several of the early Abbasids, particularly al-Manṣūr and al-Ma'mūn, were much interested in the school and its hospital and lent them their support. Two famous families of Christian physicians, the houses of Bakhtishūc (the eighth to eleventh centuries) and Māsawaih (Mesuē Major, d. 243/857), were long connected with this institution and as patrons and translators added greatly to the body of Moslem medical literature. Members of these families also came to Bagdad as teachers, translators, and practicing physicians. The synthesis of philosophical and scientific knowledge, resulting from the intercourse of scholars of diverse nationalities and cultures who gathered at Jundīshāpūr, contributed greatly to the subsequent development of Moslem studies. Greek learning was the backbone, but it received many valuable and curious accretions from contact with the sciences of other people. From the standpoint of our interest in books, the continuation of translating during the early Abbasid period is of considerable significance, for from this center as well as from Harran emanated many of the books which found their way into the great libraries at Bagdad and other cities.<sup>49</sup>

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

[To be continued]

<sup>49</sup> Information on the school of Jundīshāpūr is exceedingly fragmentary; the following references are valuable: Sarton, *op. cit.*, I, 417, 419, 435 f.; art. "Djundīshāpūr," *Ency. Islām*; Puschmann, *History of Medical Education* (Eng. trans.), pp. 172 f.; D. Campbell, *Arabian Medicine* (London, 1926), pp. 46–48; E. G. Browne, *Arabian Medicine* (Cambridge, 1921), pp. 8, 11, 19–24, 34, 54, 76, 114; Sir Percy Sykes, *A History of Persia* (London, 1915), I, 40 f.; T. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sassaniden aus der Arabischen Chronik des Tabari* (Leyden, 1879), pp. 40–42; *Fihrist*, pp. 239, 241 f.; Ibn al-Kifī, *op. cit.*, p. 98.



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## BACKGROUND OF THE HISTORY OF MOSLEM LIBRARIES—*Concluded*

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Christian scholars, schools, and libraries also played an important rôle in the transmission of Greek learning to the Arabs. In addition, they contributed their own interpretations, and the influence of Christian theology is to be traced in many Moslem doctrines. The statement of A. J. Butler, concerning the state of literature among the Copts of Egypt, that "every monastery and probably every church once had its own library of manuscripts,"<sup>50</sup> is applicable also to Syria, Asia Minor, Palestine, Iraq, and Persia. An interest in learning was not limited to any one Christian sect in the East. The use of churches and monasteries as schools had a direct influence on the development of Mosque schools in Islām.<sup>51</sup> The convents of the Darwish fraternities likewise are lineal descendants of the numerous Christian houses of retreat.

Christianity, in the East especially, very early made its peace with Greek philosophy, which it adapted to its own purposes. As in Islām, so too in Christendom there were always those who viewed pagan thought with suspicion, but in spite of them Christian theology developed under its influence. At the same time that fanatical mobs plundered the Caesarion and Serapium the Fathers of the Alexandrian church were making good use of the products of Greek speculation.

However, Christianity also developed its own distinctive literature and probably the earliest Christian libraries contained chiefly collections of such works. The nucleus of church libraries consisted of necessary service-books, to which were added other writings intended for edification and instruction. Frequent allusions, such as Jerome's advice to a correspondent to consult church libraries, imply that they were numerous.<sup>52</sup> Probably in most cases the books were housed in church buildings, and in those with a triple apse it seems likely that

<sup>50</sup> *Ancient Coptic Churches in Egypt* (Oxford, 1884), II, 239.

<sup>51</sup> See art. "Masdjid," *Ency. Islām*, p. 351.

<sup>52</sup> See *Epist. XLIX*, § 3: *Ad Pammachium*.

one of the lateral apses was used to house books.<sup>53</sup> Although the earliest Christian library of which there is any record is that established by Bishop Alexander (d. 250 A.D.)<sup>54</sup> at Jerusalem, doubtless there were earlier collections wherever there were schools. For instance, at Edessa there seems to have been a medical school in the second century.<sup>55</sup> Eusebius found the collection of historical references in the library at Jerusalem invaluable for the writing of his *Ecclesiastical History*. The library at Caesarea which was used by Jerome was even more important. Here one sees the influence of the Greek tradition, for Jerome says its founder Pamphilus (d. 309 A.D.) was "a man who in his zeal for the acquisition of a library wished to take rank with Demetrius Phalerus and Pisistratus."<sup>56</sup> This was the library which treasured the supposed Hebrew original of the First Gospel and most of the works of Origen, the teacher of Pamphilus.<sup>57</sup> Augustine's bequest of his private library to the church at Hippo is well known.<sup>58</sup>

The first imperial library which gave a place to Christian writings was that of Constantine, in which were preserved such as survived the destructive influence of Diocletian. This collection of about sixty-nine hundred volumes was added to by Julian and Theodosius the Younger. Later emperors also collected books. Some scholars, including Tischendorf, have believed that the imperial library or parts of it survived the Fall of Constantinople and was preserved in the Seraglio of the Turkish sultans.<sup>59</sup>

Nestorians from the beginning seemed to have been interested in books; they served as one of the chief bridges between Greek and Moslem learning, for without the books which they translated at Edessa and later at Nisibis and Jundishāpūr, Arabic science would have been greatly impoverished.<sup>60</sup> Many of the best Arabic translations were made, either from the original Greek or from Syriac transla-

<sup>53</sup> J. W. Clark, *Care of Books* (Cambridge, 1901), p. 63.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>55</sup> Sarton, *op. cit.*, I, 310.

<sup>56</sup> *Epist. XXXIV: Ad Marcellum*, ed. Migne, XXII, 448.

<sup>57</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>59</sup> E. Edwards, *Libraries and Founders of Libraries* (London, 1864), pp. 19 f.

<sup>60</sup> Sarton, *op. cit.*, I, 381 f.; see also W. Wright's art. "Syriac Literature," *Ency. Brit.* (9th ed.).

tion, by Christians, chief of whom were Ḥunain ibn Iṣḥāḳ (Johannitius) and his pupils. They in turn were indebted to earlier translators—for instance, Sergius of Rāsʿain and Jacob of Edessa.<sup>61</sup>

However, it was not only at the great schools that literary activities were carried on. Even the smaller monasteries contained libraries, and the tasks of copying and illuminating manuscripts continued for centuries. Individual monks also possessed their private collections. Margaret Smith, speaking of educated *Ṣūfīs* (Moslem mystics) and the influence upon them of Christian mysticism and pagan philosophy, says, "The libraries of their Christian teachers, the monks of Damascus and Nisibis and Edessa, must have contained much of Christian mystical literature of the Greek and Syriac speaking churches and this would have been at the disposal of their pupils if they so wished."<sup>62</sup>

The biographies of two Nestorian monks, Rabban Bar ʿIdta and Rabban Hormizd, translated by Budge, furnish interesting pictures of the intellectual life of the inmates of monasteries in Iraq during the years just previous to and contemporary with the rise of Islām. Some prided themselves on possessing neither furniture nor books in their cells, but others prized their books highly, as is shown by a pathetic and curious story of an old monk who had been persecuted by wicked brethren at the monastery of Mār Addōnā and fled forgetting his books.<sup>63</sup> The education of Bar ʿIdta is told in considerable detail, how weekly he took one book from the library and spent his time in pondering and memorizing it. This he continued to do for years, at the same time copying manuscripts which he sold to buy his food. The studies of young monks, who showed a scholarly turn of mind, were directed by the head of the institution who called at their cells nightly to see that they occupied themselves properly and to advise and consult with them.<sup>64</sup>

Egypt also was full of monasteries in which distinctly Christian and sometimes more secular studies were pursued. It was realized early by those who governed religious communities that without books

<sup>61</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 833 f., 839 f.; *Ḥunain ibn Iṣḥāḳ über die syrischen und arabischen Galen Übersetzungen*, zum ersten mal hersg. und übers. von G. Bergstrasser, in *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, hrsg. von der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, Vol. XVII, No. 2 (Leipzig, 1925).

<sup>62</sup> *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* (London, 1931), p. 255.

<sup>63</sup> *Histories of Rabban Hormizd etc.*, II, Part I, 246.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173 ff.

their members would soon lapse into ignorance. Hence the rule of Pachomius (292-345 A.D.), whose monastery was near Denderah in upper Egypt, provides that the books of the monastery be kept in a cupboard (*fenestra*) in the thickness of the wall. They were to be loaned one each to a monk for the period of a week, and he was expected to use it with care. The officer known as the "second" was to have charge of the books and was expected to count them every evening and lock them up.<sup>65</sup> The translation of the Septuagint into Syriac and the correction of the Syriac version of the New Testament, much of which was done at the celebrated Ennaton Monastery, are instances of the sort of activities which engaged the monks. Unfortunately some of their work was marred by their prejudices; especially was there dishonesty in handling the texts of the Fathers.<sup>66</sup>

Anyone interested in Eastern libraries cannot fail to admire the *Excursus on the History of the Library of the Syrian Monastery of Scetis* in Hugh G. Evelyn White's recent *History of the Monasteries of Nitria and Scetis*.<sup>67</sup> This monastery was founded in 535 A.D. There are only a few bits of information on the library during its early years, as, for example, a Syriac codex now in the Vatican, which bears a date equivalent to July 30, 576, as the time when it was purchased for the monastery. For the long period from the ninth century to the present the author has been able to build up a surprisingly detailed account of this remarkable library. Precious manuscripts from it have found their way into several European collections, notably that of the Vatican. The suggestion that very little is known about the Arabic books it contains is tantalizing.<sup>68</sup>

One longs to be able to reconstruct such a history of some Moslem library. With the exception of the Azhar University in Cairo, no Mohammedan institution has had such a long life. Unfortunately, all the facilities for the study of the Azhar are not accessible to Western scholars and no Moslem thus far has troubled to collect the necessary details. It is to be hoped someone will be inspired to do so. Probably

<sup>65</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*, pp. 64 f.

<sup>66</sup> E. J. Butler, *Arab Conquest of Egypt*, pp. 94 f.

<sup>67</sup> Pp. 439 ff. This volume is Part II of his *Monasteries of the Wādī'n-Natrūn*, published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1932). Part III, *Architecture and Archeology* (1933), contains considerable interesting material on the libraries of this and other monasteries; see Index.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Part II, p. 458.

an examination of the books in the several departments of this celebrated mosque school would also yield information on other libraries, for manuscripts have a way of traveling and often bear the seals or the signatures and notes of previous owners and readers.

In the monasteries of the Egyptian desert the libraries were housed quite regularly along with other valuables in the keep (*kašr*), a great fortified tower usually situated near the principal church intended both as a place of refuge and as a treasure-house. As in Moslem libraries, the books were usually kept in cupboards or wall niches, and the stipulations for their care and use are reminiscent of those in the above-mentioned *Rule of Saint Pachomius*. The collections were built up by the industry of skilled copyists among the monks, by purchase, and chiefly by gift. In 927 A.D. the Abbot Moses of Nisibis of the Syrian monastery went to Bagdad to petition the caliph al-Muqtadir to remove a tax which had been placed on Christian monks. He utilized this opportunity for travel to collect a large number of books, some of which he bought while others were presented to him.<sup>69</sup> Off and on in subsequent years more books were received from Syria and Iraq. These, as well as the records of visitors, show that contacts were maintained with the homeland.

For our purpose, possibly the most interesting aspect of the history of the Syrian monastery is the fluctuating fortunes of the library, dependent both on internal conditions, such as whether the abbot was a man of intellectual interests, the abilities of the monks, and the wealth of the institution, and on external, especially political circumstance. In times of peace and prosperity the library received notable gifts from wealthy patrons, and monks had the leisure for study. During the period of unrest and strife which characterized the reign of the Fāṭimid al-Mustanšir, this monastery as well as others suffered from the ravages of certain Arab and Berber tribes. These were especially severe following the overthrow of the Turkish leader Nāṣir al-Dawla in 1069 A.D., at which time the libraries of the caliph's palace and the House of Science at Cairo were also plundered.

The whole story of the library of the Syrian monastery contains many illuminating parallels to that of Moslem libraries, and one

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 337 f., 443-45.



realizes that Eastern libraries, whether Christian or Mohammedan, were very similar. The chief differences are the smaller numbers of books in Christian libraries, the more limited nature of the collections, and, above all, their much more restricted use. Reputable visitors might peruse the almost exclusively religious writings, and very occasionally books were borrowed by other monasteries for copying, but there is nothing suggestive of the public nature of Moslem libraries.

Before leaving the subject of Christian libraries, it may be of interest to notice that scholarly individuals and not necessarily always ecclesiastics, also owned excellent collections of books. John Moschus, who with his pupil and friend Sophronius visited Egypt in the latter part of the sixth century, mentions several libraries in monasteries and private homes. That of the student Cosmas he considered the finest private library in Alexandria. This man was very poor; he possessed no furniture save a table and a bed, but his house was filled with books. His library was open to all comers, who were privileged to read there. Cosmas spent his time in study and arguments with the Jews, and admitted he had seldom quitted his library in thirty-three years.<sup>70</sup> Probably the Moslem custom of bequeathing books to mosques was learned from such Christian scholars as the Syrian bishop of Amida, Moro Bar Kustant, who while living in Alexandria during the first half of the sixth century formed a library. On his death it was transferred to the treasury of the church of Amida.<sup>71</sup>

With all their absorption in theological matters, there were probably many Christians who heeded the advice of Archbishop Theon of Alexandria to the chief chamberlain and librarian of the emperor, contained in a letter written about 290 A.D. He reminds him that the library is the most important of all the imperial treasures, for no Christian should despise secular literature and the librarian must know all about books. They should be arranged systematically with a catalogue and care is to be exercised that all copies are faithful and true. It is the librarian's duty to restore damaged manuscripts and, unless the emperor has so specified, it is not essential that all books

<sup>70</sup> Butler, *op. cit.*, pp. 99 f.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101, from Zachariah of Mitylene, p. 209.

be written in gold on purple vellum.<sup>72</sup> We shall see how similar these duties are to those of Moslem librarians.

Coming into such a world where books had long been valued and preserved, where reading and study were marks of culture, and where through the centuries there had been a tradition of libraries, is it any wonder that the Arabs soon felt it both incumbent upon them and desirable to have their own written literature and libraries? Hitherto memory had been considered an adequate storehouse for poetry, tribal history, and other information which merited preservation. Professional reciters could be depended upon to keep and dispense, on the spur of the moment, anything which the individual might not know himself. All this changed when the Arabs came into contact with the outside world. The memory was still relied on to a degree almost unbelievable to us today, but new information poured in which could only be retained in written form. If Moslems were to make use of the diversified knowledge to which they fell heirs, they must have books, preferably in the Arabic language, and these books must be preserved in safety and rendered accessible to readers. Hence the rise of libraries.

The cultural history of Islām is incomprehensible unless one is constantly reminded of the debt to its forerunners and contemporaries of various nationalities, religions, and civilizations. But that which makes Moslem history fascinating and significant is the use made of this diversified heritage.

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104 f.